



# Involvement or Engagement?

*We need to relate to families not as clients, but as partners in school and community improvement.*

**Larry Ferlazzo**

“Hello, is this John’s mother? This is his English teacher, Mr. Ferlazzo. John has had a rough day.”

“I like teaching in this school because the parents don’t bother us much.”

“We need parent volunteers to bake cookies for the fund-raiser.”

“I wish parents here cared enough to get their kids to do their homework.”

**T**hese quotes (all of which I’ve heard—except the first one, which I’ve said) illustrate how educators often feel about parents: We should contact them when there is a problem, it’s good when they don’t “bother” us, we need them to raise money, and we can blame them for all kinds of things we’re not happy about. Unfortunately, research and experience show that these attitudes do not lead to the kind of school-family connections that raise student achievement.

However, the right kinds of school-family connections—those built on relationships, listening, welcoming, and shared decision making—*can* produce multiple benefits for students, including higher grade point averages and test scores, better attendance, enrollment in more challenging courses, better social skills, and improved behavior at home and at school (Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2002). Such school-family connections address important nonschool factors—such as health, safety, and

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affordable housing—that account for about two-thirds of the variance in student achievement (Rothstein, 2010). These connections can also improve parents' feelings of efficacy and increase community support for schools.

### What's the Difference?

To create the kinds of school-family partnerships that raise student achievement, improve local communities, and increase public support, we need to understand the difference between family *involvement* and family *engagement*. One of the dictionary definitions of *involve* is “to enfold or envelope,” whereas one of the meanings of *engage* is “to come together and interlock.” Thus, involvement implies *doing to*; in contrast, engagement implies *doing with*.

A school striving for family involvement often leads with its mouth—identifying projects, needs, and goals and then telling parents how they can contribute. A school striving for parent engagement, on the other hand, tends to lead with its ears—listening to what parents think, dream, and worry about. The goal of family engagement is not to serve clients but to gain partners.

It's not that family involvement is bad. Almost all the research says that any kind of increased parent interest and support of students can help. But almost all the research also says that family engagement can produce even better results—for students, for families, for schools, and for their communities (Ferlazzo & Hammond, 2009).

### Empowering Families and Communities

Effective family engagement requires the school to develop a relationship-building process focused on listening. One way to begin this process is for teachers and other staff members to make pre-arranged visits to students' homes.

Unfortunately, in many urban



neighborhoods, the only public entities that usually send representatives to visit are the police and child protective services. Schools can fill this void and send a different, more positive message.

At Luther Burbank High School, an urban school serving 2,000 students in Sacramento, California, scores of teachers, counselors, and classified staff make hundreds of home visits each summer. We visit the homes of all incoming freshmen, as well as all older students who have not yet passed the California High School Exit Exam. These visits are not just to tell students and their parents what to expect when they enter high school or to harangue them about the need to work harder to graduate. Our primary goal is to listen to the wisdom that parents have gained in more than 14 years of raising their children. We want to learn about their hopes and dreams for their children and discuss how the school can work with them to make those dreams a reality.

The school coordinates its home visits with the nationally recognized Parent Teacher Home Visit Project ([www.pthvp.org](http://www.pthvp.org)), which works with school districts throughout the United States to set up similar programs. Independent evaluations of this project have shown that such visits result in numerous academic benefits for students (Cowan, Bobby, St. Roseman, & Echandia, 2002; Tuss, 2007).

The listening process can take many forms. The home visitors sometimes respond to the concerns that parents express by encouraging them to connect with one another and move toward broader action. For example, during one of our home visits with a Hmong immigrant family a few years ago, the father told us how impressed he was with the online literacy program the school was using to help his son. He added that he wished he could afford to have a computer and Internet connection at home so that he and the rest of the family

could also use the program to learn English.

The teacher visitor suggested that if the father knew other parents who had a similar interest in getting access to the literacy program, he might want to bring them together in a meeting with school staff members to explore ways to address this need. The father did so, and out of that process, the parents and the school developed a family literacy project that provided computers and home Internet access to immigrant families, who used the school's website to increase their English skills.

Initially, we used discarded computers and obtained a private foundation grant to pay for Internet access. Later, the school district allocated federal grants so refugee students could purchase new computers and continue the program. Students whose families participated in the project had a fourfold increase in their English assessment scores, and the International Reading Association gave the project its 2007 Presidential Award for Reading and Technology.

Our school's successful Parent University began in much the same way. Some parents expressed an interest in learning more about how the schools operate. Parents then came together with school staff and representatives from a local university to develop a curriculum that parents wanted—not a predesigned agenda constructed by others. These monthly classes, which often attract as many as 100 parents, offer simultaneous translation in Hmong and English and include sessions on naturalization and citizenship, high school graduation requirements, and college readiness and financing.

Successful engagement efforts like these are similar to the work of traditional community organizers. People first tell their stories and then share them with others. The group develops a different vision of what might be

possible and then takes collective action. It's the difference between *irritation*—challenging others to act on something *you're* interested in—and *agitation*—challenging others to act on something *they're* concerned about.

Using the community organizer model, schools have worked with local religious congregations, businesses, neighborhood groups, and labor unions to tackle community problems. For example, schools have built partnerships to help stop toxic incinerators from being built nearby, assisted in getting approvals for local affordable housing, and challenged officials to increase public safety in entire neighborhoods, not just on the school grounds. The Annenberg Institute for School Reform has extensively documented a multiyear study showing the positive effects community organizing can have on students, schools, families, and neighborhoods (Mediratta et al., 2008).

Schools have a long history of developing and deepening relationships among different entities in the community. In fact, the term *social capital*, which describes the societal and economic value of building connections among people, was developed by a school superintendent nearly 100 years ago. L. J. Hanifan (1916), a state supervisor of public schools in West Virginia, coined the phrase while promoting a parent engagement strategy that yielded numerous benefits. Hanifan concluded,

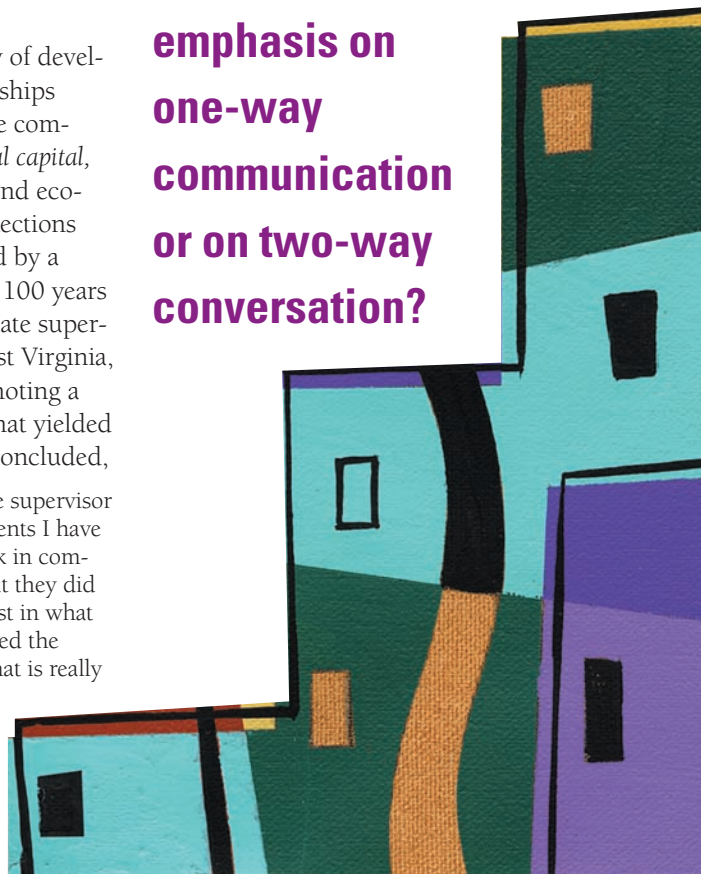
I am firmly convinced that the supervisor and teachers whose achievements I have described have struck bedrock in community building. It is not what they did for the people that counts most in what was achieved; it is what they led the people to do for themselves that is really important. Tell the people what they ought to do, and they will say in effect, "Mind your own business." But help them to discover for themselves what ought to be done, and they

will not be satisfied until it is done. . . . The more the people do for themselves the larger will community social capital become, and the greater will be the dividends upon the social investment. (p. 138)

### The Temptation to Settle for Involvement

Given the pressures to immediately increase test scores, it is tempting for schools to emphasize family involvement rather than family engagement. After all, most family involvement programs can have a positive effect on student achievement, and they are generally easier to implement than engagement models. Unfortunately, some of the most well-publicized family involvement efforts right now—tempting as they might be—are likely to have

Is your school's emphasis on one-way communication or on two-way conversation?





negative consequences.

For example, some school districts in Texas and Delaware are planning to pay parents to participate in more school events, despite the fact that New York City ended a similar program because it did not achieve the desired results (Bosman, 2010). In a similar initiative, Detroit schools are working with businesses to offer store discounts to parents who visit school parent centers. As Daniel Pink (2009) has shown in his book *Drive*, financial incentives may work in the short term to motivate people to do mechanical tasks (such as showing up for a meeting), but they will do little to stimulate more cognitively challenging work (such as making it a priority to ask children about their school day or assist them with their homework). In fact, paying parents for participation can actually reduce motivation for doing these more challenging tasks. And when the incentives are gone, everyone is worse off than before.

In Newark, New Jersey, schools are using \$1 million of their \$100 million donation from Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg to hire workers, including former census workers, to canvas door-to-door asking people what they think about local schools. Compared with the work required for schools to develop reciprocal, long-lasting relationships, this information-gathering effort is certainly easier—and somebody else is paid to do it. But there's a reason why community organizers call this strategy *slash and burn*—it can be destructive to the overall community ecosystem because it gives people a sense of doing something by just answering a survey with no serious commitment. As a result, it produces no sustainable long-term benefits.

### Expanded Possibilities

Consider the methods your school uses to invite parents to participate. Invitations for parent involvement often come

through one-way forms of communication—notes home, automated phone calls, or requests for assistance for a particular project. In fact, the dictionary's first definition for *communication* is “an act or instance of transmitting.” Invitations for parent engagement, on the other hand, tend to come as a result of *conversation*, a word whose Latin root means “to keep company with; to live with.”

## Successful engagement efforts like these are similar to the work of traditional community organizers.

Family involvement and engagement are not mutually exclusive; most schools pursue both. But when you think about your school's efforts, you'll probably see a clear direction. Does your school tend toward *doing to* or *doing with* families? Does the staff do more talking or more listening? Is the emphasis on one-way communication or on two-way conversation? Is your school's vision of its community confined to the school grounds, or does this vision encompass the entire neighborhood?

Some people see power as a finite pie: If you get more, that means I have less. The vision of family engagement described here, however, views power in a different way. As families move from being school clients or volunteers to being leaders in education improvement efforts, they gain more power. As a result, the whole pie gets bigger, and more possibilities are created.

Schools can help create those expanded possibilities. 

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